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THE FORTUNES OF POLITICAL SALAFISM IN GAZA AND ALGERIA

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I. Introduction¹

Recent academic literature has recognized that Salafi theology does not predict political behavior.² The chief proponent of this view, Quintan Wiktorowicz, splits Salafi political behavior into three categories: purist, political, and jihadi. While we agree with Wiktorowicz's framework, it does not explain why some Salafist strains are more dominant in some countries than in others. We are particularly interested in conditions that lead Salafis to participate in parliamentary electoral politics, a curious subset of the "political" category given that Salafis generally tend to repudiate it as usurping God's authority. We will examine this puzzle using Algeria and Gaza for our case studies. Both have jihadi and purist Salafism, but Gaza lacks political Salafism whereas in Algeria it was the main vehicle of political contestation in the early 1990s. We propose that Salafis engage in electoral politics in Muslim-majority Sunni countries when the state permits them and when they have an electorally significant following.

Wiktorowicz argues that while Salafis share a common religious creed that emphasizes the oneness of God and is based on the Quran and the *Sunnah* (the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad), their subjective interpretations of these texts lead to divisions within the movement, which often center on contemporary politics and conditions.³ The first of these divisions are the "purists," who "believe that the primary emphasis of the [Salafi] movement should be promoting the Salafi creed and combating deviant practices." Wiktorowicz states that purists believe "society does not yet understand the tenets of faith," meaning political action will only lead to sin and corruption. Additionally, purists do not support violence against the state. They justify their stance claiming that when the Meccans repressed the Prophet Muhammad and the early Muslim converts, Muhammad did not advocate violence against the state. Rather, he

¹ Special thanks to Dr. William McCants for his patient advice and guidance.

² Wiktorowicz.

³ Ibid, 207-208.

used a peaceful approach to spread Islam that did not overly endanger the nascent Muslim community. Salafis believe that their “actions should not create a greater evil, such as weakening Islamic (Salafi) propagation” and they are against declaring the state an infidel because that leads to reprisals, which are a “greater evil.”⁴ Thus, purists are not above attempting to influence the state, but it should be through a mass movement of “believers,” gained through propagation, not through political action, which leads to corruption, or violence, which puts the Muslim community in danger.

The second division is the “politicos,” who claim that the purists ignore pressing local and international issues, like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which cannot wait until Salafists change society through religious propagation. Unlike the purists, the politics believe it is a moral duty to challenge the state on these political issues to protect Islam and to expand their influence within the state, lest the rulers destroy Islam. Generally being younger than their purist counterparts, the politics believe that only they possess the modern knowledge to “render informed fatwas about political issues.”⁵ Thus, the politics do not challenge the purists on the Salafi creed; rather, they believe that that purists’ rejection of modern politics has made them irrelevant and out of touch with Muslims.⁶ Since physically combating the state would lead to more problems, they believe that the only way to remain relevant, incite change, and gain power is through participating in politics.

Finally, the jihadi faction emerged in Afghanistan during the 1980s. Unlike their politico cohorts, who gained their Islamic narrative in Muslim Brotherhood-influenced universities, these Salafis received their religious training on the battlefield, which emphasized “politics as

⁴ Ibid, 217.

⁵ Ibid, 221-223.

⁶ Ibid, 225.

warfare.”⁷ The jihadists believe the purists are unwilling to reveal the truth about how religiously corrupt their governments have become and they criticize the purists for their unwillingness to put their “belief into practice by addressing the injustices of the regime and its American (and Zionist) masters.”⁸ Thus, like the politicians, the jihadists do not believe the beliefs of the purists—or the politicians—are incorrect; rather, they believe the other two factions fail to implement the proper courses of action to correct such supposed injustices. As such, they take up arms against the state in order to enact the change they believe the others will not.

In short, all three Salafi factions believe modern governments are corrupt and un-Islamic, but they have different manners to address this view. The purists refrain from taking part in government and politics in order to remain uncorrupted, refrain from creating more harm than good, and to gain power through propagation of their religious views. The politicians believe there are pressing modern problems the purists cannot engage, so they take part in politics in the hope of enacting proper change and expanding their power and influence. Finally, the jihadists, believing the purists and politicians have been duped, act with more expediency and violently oppose their government to forcefully replace it with one they believe is proper.

II. Salafism in Algeria

Previous studies of Algerian Salafism have confirmed the presence of three distinct Salafi communities within the country. Amel Boubekeur of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace argues that Algerian Salafis are divided into political, jihadi, and *da’wa* (i.e. purist) communities,⁹ roughly following the framework set forth by Quintan Wiktorowicz.¹⁰ While

⁷ Ibid, 225-226.

⁸ Ibid, 227-228.

⁹ Boubekeur, 3.

¹⁰ Wiktorowicz, 208.

these distinct groups accept the same religious teachings at a macro-level, applying a purist interpretation of the text of the Qur'an and Sunnah, local religious leaders interpret these texts according to local contexts, producing differences in the application of their faith in daily life.

These distinct communities, however, are not static entities that remain unchanged over time. Indeed, over the course of the last thirty years, local allegiances and memberships within the political, jihadi, and *da'wa* sects of Algerian Salafism have changed greatly. The shifting nature of these Salafi communities, specifically the rise of political Salafism in Algeria in the late 1980s and early 1990s, are explained by the changing domestic political context, and shifting opportunities for power acquisition on the ground.

Political Salafis, practicing *al-salafiyya al-siyasiyya* (political), or *al-salafiyya al-harakiyya* (dynamic, or “movement” Salafism), have been embodied by the Islamic Salvation Front and its failed attempt to assume power through elections in the early 1990s. Jihadi Salafis, or *al-salafiyya al-jihadiyya*, are those that are active in armed conflict against the state or other international actors, having rejected the electoral process as a legitimate answer to the call for the creation of an Islamic state. Several of these groups have operated or continue to operate in Algeria like Armed Islamic Militia, the Salafi Group for Call and Combat, and finally Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb.¹¹

The third and final Salafi groups within Algeria are the *da'wa* Salafis, also called *al-salafiyya al-'ilmiyya* (scientific Salafism), who are known for their devotion to Islamic scholarship. This group occupies a third space outside of the milieu of Algerian politics and violence, and is even characterized as apathetic toward the ventures of their political and jihadi counterparts.¹²

¹¹ Boubekur, 3.

¹² Boubekur, 3.

Despite the operational differences between the political, *da'wa*, and jihadi sects of Salafi adherents in Algeria, they are united on the basis of what could be called “macro-level” religious authority. As a centerpiece to the Salafi *manhaj*, or belief system, each group holds the text of the Qur'an and Hadith as the foundation to their religious legitimacy and further expanded their beliefs through classical Salafi authorities like Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Qayyim, Ibn 'Abd Al-Wahhab, and 'Abd Al-'Aziz Bin Baz.¹³ These movements begin to differ, however, upon the application of religious principles to everyday life and the methods of spreading their message, to which “micro-level” authority is applied. This micro-level authority is produced by an amalgamation of local religious leaders that is unique to each Salafi group. By making proclamations and rulings based upon localized and highly subjective religious and experiential issues, these religious leaders effectively steer Salafi practices at the ground level.

The key difference between the frameworks of Wiktorowicz and Boubekour is that according to the latter, the politico, jihadi, and purist factions of Salafism within Algeria are not static entities. Indeed, membership within these groups, and the practicing of the Salafi creed as dictated by their local religious leaders, has changed over time depending upon the Algerian social, political, and security context.¹⁴

What, then, accounts for these changing allegiances and the rise of political Salafism in Algeria in the late 1980s and early 1990s? A short review of Algerian history reveals that members of each Salafi community changed their allegiance according to political opportunities that were available over time as a result of a rational calculation of how to best maximize their efforts to gain power.

¹³ “A Brief Introduction to the Salafi Da'wa,” 2.

¹⁴ Boubekour, 14.

While an element of Salafism was present in Algerian society prior to the 1980s, the rise and spread of the Salafi ideology throughout the country was fueled largely by the influx of war veterans returning home after the defeat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.¹⁵ After experiencing victory against the Soviets, with an Arab contingent that Algerian Islamic militants largely founded and comprised,¹⁶ mujahidin began returning to their native lands only to experience frustration at the stagnation of the Islamic revival at home.¹⁷ Armed with religious and military training from the likes of Osama Bin Laden and ‘Abdullah ‘Azzam, these hardened veterans of jihad set their sights upon dismantling the Algerian regime in order to create an Islamic state at home.¹⁸

The foundation of the new Algerian Salafi movement, which was characterized by this influx of Afghan Arab veterans, was catapulted into action in 1988 by constitutional changes instituted under Chadli Bendjedid’s presidency. The new constitution redefined the Algerian polity as “democratic and popular,” and guaranteed the right “to form associations of a political nature.” Article 40, which in practice instituted a multi-party political system based upon competition, created a previously unheard of opportunity for Algerian Salafis to seize power legitimately and bloodlessly.¹⁹ The opportunity for political competition was followed by the creation of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), which carried the flag of political Salafism in Algeria for the entirety of its existence.²⁰

Through its rise and fall, the FIS personified the Algerian Salafi struggle to create an Islamic state through political means, operating within the context of the current state that they

¹⁵ Kohlmann, 1.

¹⁶ Muhammed, 81-82.

¹⁷ Kohlmann, 3.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Naylor.

²⁰ “The Islamic Salvation Front,” *Saaid.net*.

are trying to change. As a hybrid religious-political movement, the Islamic Salvation Front garnered its religious legitimacy from a number of local Algerian religious authorities, offering localized micro-level applications to the macro-level religious authorities mentioned above. Of these local leaders, Sheikh ‘Abd Al-Hamid Ibn Badis is most prominent.²¹ As the founder of the Algerian Reformist ‘Ulama, he espoused the belief that Islam is a flexible faith “capable of adapting to the modern world if freed from its non-Islamic and vulgar accretions.”²² The Islamic Salvation Front later adopted this principle in the formulation of a domestic and foreign policy built completely upon the teachings of the Qur’an and the Hadith, as interpreted by its senior religious and political leadership.²³

As the first round of parliamentary elections in 1990 came to a close, the Islamic Salvation Front garnered 54% of votes cast, effectively giving it control over 850 cities and towns, which included Algiers, Oran, and over two-thirds of Algeria’s 48 provincial assemblies.²⁴ With the prospect of the Islamic Salvation Front gaining power in Algeria’s first legitimate election becoming very real, the military cancelled the second round of elections, instituted a state of emergency, banned the FIS and imprisoned much of its leadership.²⁵ The actions taken by the military sparked what became known as Algeria’s “black decade,” a civil war that ravaged the country, leaving hundreds of thousands dead.²⁶

The cancellation of elections in 1992 effectively closed the window of opportunity for political Salafis in Algeria to attain power through legitimate means. The result of this change in Algerian political reality resulted in an allegiance shift by many political Salafis toward violence.

²¹ “Anwar H. Haddam: An Islamist Vision for Algeria.”

²² “Sheikh ‘Abd Al-Hamid Ben Badis.”

²³ “The Islamic Salvation Front,” *Saaid.net*.

²⁴ Mortimer, 38.

²⁵ Kohlmann, 3.

²⁶ Martinez.

When the political option disappeared from the Algerian landscape violence became the most feasible way, if not the only way, to attain power.

Under the aegis of the civil war that followed the cancelling of elections in 1992, militants from every point of the spectrum of violence and religion coalesced to fight the Algerian state. Clearly emulating the model they experienced in Afghanistan, they believed that as one unified Muslim entity they would be victorious against the state they were fighting. Violent movements that had been present within Algeria for over a decade, like the Armed Islamic Movement (MIA) founded by Mustafa Bouyali,²⁷ joined forces with the military wing of the FIS, the Islamic Salvation Army and other groups, to form what became known as the Armed Islamic Group (GIA).²⁸ During the first years of the civil war, the GIA spread violence without remorse throughout Algeria, targeting anyone affiliated with the state, groups of civilians,²⁹ and even hijacking an Air France flight.³⁰ As the civil war continued, however, the very zeal for violence and change in the name of Islam that prompted the coalition of movements in the GIA eventually resulted in the splitting of the Algerian Salafi and jihadi movement at its core, the results of which are still being felt in Algeria today.

The indiscriminate targeting and killing of Algerian civilians throughout the country led to a bifurcation within the Armed Islamic Group, resulting in the formation of the Salafi Group for Call and Combat (GSPC) by Hassan Hattab, a former leader within the GIA, which publically rejected the killing of Algerian civilians.³¹ Supposedly formed with the blessing of Osama Bin Laden himself, hoping to purify the image of the Algerian jihad in the eyes of

²⁷ al-Masri, 148.

²⁸ Ibid, 149.

²⁹ Ait-Larbi, Ait-Belkacem, Belaid, Nait-Redjam, and Soltani.

³⁰ Taylor.

³¹ Keats.

Muslims around the world who were appalled by the indiscriminate killing of civilians, the GSPC picked up the banner of Salafi jihad as the GIA disintegrated.³²

As the Algerian civil war ended, the armed Islamic effort to oust the government also lost considerable ground. Amnesty and reintegration programs sponsored by the government to rebuild the country, not only structurally but also emotionally, prompted many Islamists to lay down their arms against the state and return to their normal lives in exchange for immunity from prosecution for crimes committed during the war.³³

The decision of many of the civil war's jihadi Salafis to accept amnesty and lay down their arms shows yet again the rational calculation of Salafi actors according to the options available to them. As a result of the Islamic Salvation Front's failure to seize power in the early 1990s, the bloody civil war that followed, and government policies aimed at the resolution of conflict within Algerian society, much of the Salafi community within Algeria has essentially lost the passion for spreading their conception of Islam through politics or violence, and have deemed it as an irrational means to achieve their ends. Instead, political and jihadi Salafis have largely withdrawn from society in order to simply execute Salafism as a way of life, spreading the message through word of mouth and example alone. As these groups embraced apathy toward the state after the political process was discredited and violence failed, the *da'wa* Salafis have become the most prominent group within Algeria.³⁴

Although Wiktorowicz's framework regarding the division of the Salafi community into political, jihadi, and purist (*da'wa*) clearly applies to the Algerian context, application of Amel Boubekeur's concepts and an analysis of Algerian history over the last thirty years reveal that Algerian Salafi groups are not static entities. While political, jihadi, and *da'wa* elements are

³² Kohlmann, 12.

³³ "Algeria: New Amnesty Law Will Ensure Atrocities Go Unpunished."

³⁴ Boubekeur, 15.

assuredly comprised of unchanging elements that create their ideological core, the peripheries of these movements have been extremely fluid and able to change their Salafi allegiance according to realities and opportunities on the ground.

The rise of political Salafism in Algeria therefore, as exemplified by the failed Islamic Salvation Front in the early 1990s, is explained by the opportunity for Salafis to gain power legitimately and bloodlessly through elections. The 1988 constitution allowing for a multi-party system and political competition within Algeria created an opportunity for Salafis to take over the state in an efficient and non-violent way, making violence to achieve the same ends irrational. It was only after the cancellation of elections and outlawing of the FIS that violence became the modus operandi of much of the Salafi population within Algeria. When presented with the option of politics over violence, Algerian Salafis rationally chose politics as a means to achieve their ends.

III. Salafism in Gaza

The Salafists are relative newcomers to the Islamic stage in Gaza. The ideology started percolating into Palestinian society during the 1970s with Saudi-educated Palestinians returning to the Palestinian Territories.³⁵ According to Shaykh Yasin al-Astal, a prominent Gazan Salafi and head of the Scientific Council for the Salafi Mission in Palestine, Shaykh Salim Sharab was the “first scholar to bring Salafi thought from Saudi Arabia to the [Gaza] Strip.” He allegedly connected Gazan Salafis to their counterparts in Saudi Arabia and operated in the al-Azhar Religious Institute in Gaza and Gaza’s Islamic University.³⁶ Saudi Arabia accelerated the movement of Salafist theology into the Palestinian Territories in reaction to the 1979 Iranian

³⁵ Cohen, Levitt, and Wasser, 8.

³⁶ Hroub, 228.

Revolution and the resulting perception that the Ayatollahs presented a strong challenge to Saudi Arabia's Islamic leadership.³⁷

Today, Salafism continues to expand in Gaza. By Hamas's 2006 electoral victory, Salafi-jihadist groups began to emerge in opposition to Hamas, adding a new extreme and violent element to Gaza's Islamic milieu. As a result, two Salafist trends exist in Gaza: purist and Salafi-jihadists.³⁸ Both groups have similar views on Islamic rituals, non-Salafists, and rival Islamists, but they diverge greatly when addressing politics and jihad. The purists eschew violence and support Palestinian President Mahmud 'Abbas, while the Salafi-jihadists practice violence and do not support any political entity except their own. Notably, Gaza lacks any significant political Salafist faction due to a poor political climate for Salafists and the failure of Palestinian politics in general. The following deals with the similarities and differences between the two Salafist trends and account for why the political trend is not prevalent.

Like Salafists elsewhere in the world, both purists and Salafi-jihadists in Gaza form their exclusivist self-identities vis-à-vis their view of the "religious Other."³⁹ While this phenomenon is clear in their rhetoric regarding Shi'as or Sufis, it also is apparent in their approach to prayer. Shaykh Ibrahim Barakat, a Palestinian Salafi preacher,⁴⁰ claims in a fatwa, "Abstaining from prayer is a major decision; it is a sin of the greatest sins." He continues, "Abandoning prayer is a great unbelief in the community regardless if the abandonment is out of ignorance or misinterpretation."⁴¹ For Barakat, the world is black and white; Muslims pray while infidels,

³⁷ Ibid, 223-224.

³⁸ Cohen, Levitt, and Wasser, 8.

³⁹ Duderija, 88.

⁴⁰ Shaykh Barakat heads the Association of Ahl al-Sunna in Jerusalem. While he is not a Gazan Salafi, his views and activities are similar to those of purists in Gaza. Thus, for the purposes of this paper, we consider his views as equitable with the views of Gazan Salafists. Hroub, 225-229.

⁴¹ Barakat.

even if they claim to be Muslims, do not or pray incorrectly. This same dichotomy exists among Salafi-jihadists. Abu al-Nur al-Maqdisi, the leader of Jund Ansar Allah until Hamas killed him in August of 2009, used several supposed *hadith* (sayings of Muhammad) to argue that one who does not pray is an infidel. He cited sayings like, “Between man and unbelief is abstaining from prayer” (Muslim, 1:0146) and “I have been ordered to fight the people until they testify that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God, they pray, and they give zakat” (Muslim, 1:0033). From his analysis of these *hadith*, al-Maqdisi, like Barakat, concluded that failure to pray properly is unbelief, which is punishable by death.⁴² For Salafists, believers pray and infidels do not.

This simplistic dualism also manifests itself in Salafist views of Shi’as. During a sermon regarding Islamic guidance, Shaykh al-Astal used the derogatory term “rejectionist” (*rafidah*) to describe Shi’as.⁴³ In using this term during a Friday sermon, al-Astal is indicating to his entire congregation that Shi’as are not real Muslims. Salafi-jihadists agree. Abu al-Nur al-Maqdisi described Shi’as as “rejectionist” and among the “extremists that have left the circle of Islam.”⁴⁴ A Gazan Salafi-jihadist with the penname Abu Mus’ab al-Ansari writes that Shi’as are “rejectionists” and are “a sect of polytheism and apostasy.” He warns, “Do not eat their sacrifices and do not marry their women.”⁴⁵ It is clear that for Salafists, Shi’as are infidel and almost inhuman.

Salafi-jihadists view Sufis in a similar manner. Abu al-Nur al-Maqdisi wrote, “Islam did not know the name of Sufism during the time of the Prophet, his companions, or the Followers,”

⁴² al-Maqdisi, *The Straight Path*, 51.

⁴³ al-Astal, “Islam Guides.”

⁴⁴ al-Maqdisi, *The Precious Stone*, 537.

⁴⁵ al-Ansari, 2.

which, in a Salafist's eyes, would make Sufism a form of heretic innovation.⁴⁶ He claimed that Sufism today spreads "heresy" more than in the past and that Muhammad warned of Sufism in an alleged *hadith*, "Beware of novel matters for every novelty is a heresy and every heresy is an error."⁴⁷ He also criticized Sufis for their use of "jihad of the self" rather than violent jihad. He claimed that the Quran and *Sunnah* make it clear "that jihad against the infidels is among the greatest deeds that please God."⁴⁸ In his view, Sufis are not only heretics, they are weak for not concentrating on violent jihad.

Considering there are few, if any, Shi'a in Gaza, it may seem strange that Gazan Salafi-jihadists are so vocal and prolific in their rejection of Shi'as. They base this rejection on their perception that Hamas is a Shi'a actor, or at least ignores supposed Shi'a proselytization in Gaza, because it receives Iranian support.⁴⁹ Abu Yunis al-'Abbasi, a Gazan Salafi-jihadist, adds that Shi'as and Hamas are conducting a dogmatic and media war against Salafists, while supposedly making it "nearly impossible" to learn the proper form of Islam because of the "rejectionists, who are empty of the teachings of the revelation."⁵⁰ Even though Hamas has impeccable Islamic and militant credentials, Salafi-jihadists deem the organization as un-Islamic partly because of its ties, regardless of their substance, to Iran.

Politics is another theme Salafists use to criticize Hamas. Shaykh al-Astal condemns all political parties, claiming "There are no patriotic parties" and "Party solidarity is without God."⁵¹ However, he supports President Mahmud 'Abbas, who he sees as a unifying figure that can prevent further violence and does not pose an Islamic challenge to the Salafis. In a message

⁴⁶ al-Maqdisi, *The Precious Stone*, 553.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 555.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 565.

⁴⁹ al-'Abbasi, "The Rejectionists," 2.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 6.

⁵¹ al-Astal, "Islam Guides."

directed at Hamas, he called on all parties to “work together under the umbrella of the Palestinian Liberation Organization” and to “adhere to the Palestinian national authority” as the “recognized political authority from which [Palestinians] can speak to the world.” He also called on Palestinians to “rally around the President, who is [the Palestinians’] leader in Palestine.”⁵² He gave President ‘Abbas further praise, “Verily you, oh Your Excellency the President, [...] you establish proof after proof of the Palestinian patriotic right on the land.”⁵³ While al-Astal does not state Hamas should not play a role in politics, his support for President ‘Abbas’s political apparatus over Hamas indicates that his problem is with Hamas’s political role, not necessarily politics. This is not surprising because Hamas is the foremost ideological challenger to Salafism in Gaza. As an Islamic movement, its political successes are also victories for its brand of Islam. Thus, opposition to Hamas is logical for Salafists, which is also vying for dogmatic supremacy in Gaza.

Salafi-jihadists, as indicated above with their classification of Hamas as a Shi’a entity, reject their Hamas coreligionists, other non-Salafi-jihadists, and even expand their rejection to Gazan society in general. Abu Mus’ab al-Ansari states, “[Islamic groups around the world] have lost their origins, lack adherence to the evidence, are shortsighted, and cajole the tyrants. [...] In fact, most of them have adopted nationalism [such as Hamas]. These groups are heretic movements.” He insinuates that Hamas lacks the proper Islamic nature because Shi’as, secularists, and Christians belong to the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas’s parent organization.⁵⁴ Finally, Mahmud Judeh, the leader of Gaza’s Salafi Excommunication and Migration Group, views all of Palestinian society as un-Islamic, does not send the group’s children to “heretic

⁵² al-Astal, “Shaykh Yasin al-Astal Demands Hamas Immediately Sign the Egyptian Charter for Reconciliation.”

⁵³ al-Astal, “Congratulations.”

⁵⁴ al-Ansari, 4-5.

schools of society,” and has the group living in an isolated community that shuns contact with the greater society.⁵⁵ Gazan Salafists reject Hamas and all other Muslims who do not conform to their strict Salafist ideology. Additionally, Gazan Salafists are fixated on Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood, which indicates that while they espouse a global narrative, local politics greatly affect their narratives.

Missionary Salafists and Salafi-jihadists both view proper prayer as an indicator between a true Muslim and an infidel, they reject the “religious Other,” and bemoan Hamas’s new political role. However, the ideologies of these two Salafi trends do diverge in two significant ways. The first is parliamentary politics. As noted above, purists, by extolling President Mahmud ‘Abbas, seem to accept that an electoral process exists and is somewhat legitimate, even if they reject politics and prefer strict rule based on their particular Islamic interpretation. Salafi-jihadists, on the other hand, reject any form of government that is not their own. Abu Mus’ab al-Ansari notes, “[E]lections in their current form are taboo and it is not permissible for a Muslim to vote, which is a sin. [...] [E]lections lead to creating Godless legislators. Not to mention that the right to vote is guaranteed for the insane, adulterers, infidels, apostates, pimps, and women—who scholars agree do not have self-control and [do not have the right] to assume public posts.” He continues calling legislative councils polytheistic and a form of “*Jahiliyah*.”⁵⁶ Anyone who participates in these councils, according to al-Ansar, commits infidelity towards God. Finally, he states, “[Salafi-jihadists] consider any nation or government that rules with positive laws an infidel government, regardless of its form, color, or type. It is permissible to attack such a nation.”⁵⁷ Thus, Salafi-jihadists unequivocally reject any government that does not

⁵⁵ Hroub, 230.

⁵⁶ A name for the pre-Islamic period, which Muslims consider a state of ignorance.

⁵⁷ al-Ansari, 3-4.

rule by their version of Islam and even sanction violence against such governments. Meanwhile, purists reluctantly accept the current political order and are content with spreading their ideology while largely eschewing politics.

The second major difference between the two trends is their attitude towards jihad. While purists believe that violent jihad is a duty and do not deny the general permissibility of jihad against Israel or other so-called infidels, they argue that the prerequisites of jihad, like a recognized Islamic leader or a proper army, are lacking, which makes the present time inappropriate for violent jihad.⁵⁸ Salafi-jihadists, however, have proven that they strongly disagree with the purist interpretation through their violent actions against Israel and the society they view as un-Islamic. Abu al-Nur al-Maqdisi wrote that jihad is an individual duty, which one can perform without the presence of an Islamic army or leader “If the enemy were in a place or country in which Muslims reside.”⁵⁹ From a Salafi-jihadist perspective, the existence of Israel clearly meets this precondition. However, even al-Maqdisi may have sensed the Salafi-jihadist calls for jihad would be stronger if a Muslim leader existed. This may explain why he declared an Islamic emirate, which prompted Hamas to attack his mosque, kill him, and destroy the upstart emirate before it began.⁶⁰ While the two trends have different approaches to politics and jihad, which are born out of different interpretations of the same religious texts, their end goals and worldviews are virtually identical.

Missing from this debate are political Salafists. Given that Hamas has turned to politics and several political parties exist in the Palestinian Territories, one could reasonably expect a political Salafist faction to emerge and form a Salafist party. The fact that this has not happened,

⁵⁸ Hroub, 229.

⁵⁹ al-Maqdisi, *The Straight Path*, 444.

⁶⁰ Roggio.

however, is not surprising because currently real political opportunity for Salafists does not exist in Gaza for several reasons. First, Hamas remains the prominent Islamic movement in Gaza, and actively seeks out and destroys those who challenge it, whether they are Fatah members⁶¹ or Salafi-jihadists,⁶² but they have not been attacking purists. Thus, it is likely that any party that openly challenges Hamas and poses a threat could meet violent opposition, making the formation of a Salafist political party dangerous and deadly, making adherence to purism more attractive. Second, because Hamas has such a strong presence in Gaza and Salafists do not have the material means to enact the social programs Hamas can, Salafism remains a fringe movement,⁶³ making it unlikely to gain any real political reach or power if they were to form a party. Finally, the two most successful Palestinian political parties, Hamas and Fatah, gained much of their popularity and political influence “resisting” Israel. Therefore, to have any real political future, the Salafists would have to initiate a large militant campaign against Israel, which is a condition favoring the formation of Salafi-jihadist groups, not political Salafism. These three conditions suggest that if Hamas were weakened, Salafism became more popular, or Salafi-jihadists waged a large-scale militant campaign against Israel, political Salafist groups could emerge in the vacuum of a weakened Hamas or on the coattails of Salafi-jihadists or purists.

Salafism in Gaza remains a fringe movement, but indications exist that some Hamas members are unhappy with the political process and are turning to violent Salafism. Hamas’s promotion of armed resistance and the Islamization of society, which stands in stark contrast to the political track it is currently on, “inadvertently encourages its core constituency to defect to more militant Salafist groups.”⁶⁴ Hamas has exchanged the simplistic black and white

⁶¹ “Hamas Battles for Control of Gaza.”

⁶² Roggio.

⁶³ Cohen, Levitt, and Wasser, 9.

⁶⁴ Sayigh, 7.

dichotomy it presented in the past with the muddy realities of politics and self-governing. This has disillusioned hardliners “who believe there is no middle road.”⁶⁵ This new reality allows Salafists, who present the world in stark “us versus them” terms, to set the Islamic agenda, placing Hamas on the ideological defensive. Hamas’s response has been uncoordinated and it has conceded theological supremacy to the Salafists, giving them the upper hand in their ideological battle with Hamas.⁶⁶ If Hamas’s gradualist Islamist approach is not effective, its hardliners could turn to the Salafists, making violence a greater possibility and lessening any chances for peace.

IV. Conclusion

By comparing the fortunes of political Salafism in both Algeria and Gaza, a number of points become clear. As the case of Algeria shows us, the combination of a large presence of Salafis with the opportunity to legally form parties and participate in electoral politics produces an environment conducive to the rise of political Salafism. The converse of this point, however, is that in an environment where Salafism remains a fringe movement or there is insurmountable Islamist competition, as in Gaza, the rise of political Salafism is unlikely. Salafis in both Algeria and Gaza operate on a rational framework, seeking to maximize the utility of their actions according to the goals they are pursuing. In Algeria, while the option for political participation was available, Salafis flocked to the ballot box, winning the Islamic Salvation Front a plurality in 1991’s first round of parliamentary elections. It was only after the opportunity for political participation was closed that Algeria’s Salafi population turned toward violence and jihad against

⁶⁵ Lawrence Write, quoted in Cohen, Levitt, and Wasser, 25.

⁶⁶ Mneimneh.

the state and their fellow citizens. Similarly, in Gaza, political participation is not a viable option because of the Muslim Brotherhood's power, making political Salafism nonexistent with Salafis relying upon violence or proselytizing to spread their message.

If Algeria's political system was reopened, allowing for the participation of Islamist and Salafi parties once more, we could expect to see a resurgence of political Salafism. While political Salafism has largely disappeared over the last two decades, *da'wa* Salafism remains strong, and history has shown us that Salafi groups are not static entities. In Gaza, however, until Salafism expands and becomes more than a fringe movement, even an opening in the political system will not result in the emergence of political Salafism like that seen in Algeria in the 1990s.

While we examined the progression of Salafi movements in both Algeria and Gaza, as well as some of the circumstances that lead to political or militant Salafism, we did not address why only some Salafis choose politics when the environment is permissive, and others remain steadfast in their purist or jihadi convictions. Future analysis, building upon our findings, will allow us to examine further the question of why many Salafists seize the opportunity for political participation when conditions permit, but others continue to reject it.

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